

Wildlife Advocates Plan Challenge to Decision Not to Protect Wolverines

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By [Earth Justice](#)

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) today announced it will deny protections for the rare and elusive wolverine under the Endangered Species Act, prompting a coalition of conservation groups to announce an intent to sue.

"Recent scientific information makes clear that wolverines face threats from destruction of their snowy habitat due to climate change," said Earthjustice attorney Timothy Preso. "We intend to take action to make sure that the Trump administration's disregard of the real impacts of climate change does not doom the wolverine to extinction in the lower-48 states."

With fewer than 300 wolverines left in the contiguous United States, there is no justification for the FWS' decision to deny protection. Listing wolverines as threatened or endangered would trigger new, badly needed conservation efforts.

Earthjustice will represent a coalition of conservation groups — the Center for Biological Diversity, Conservation Northwest, Defenders of Wildlife, Friends of the Clearwater, Idaho Conservation League, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, and Rocky Mountain Wild.

"It's outrageous that the Fish and Wildlife Service has again shrugged off the science showing that wolverines are in trouble and desperately need federal protection," said Andrea Zaccardi, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. "It's sad that after years of inaction, we need to go to court again to ensure wolverines get the protections they need before it's too late."

"The wolverines in the Clearwater Basin are in particular trouble, in part, because the Forest Service allows snowmobile use in prime wolverine habitat," said Gary Macfarlane, with Friends of the Clearwater. "With climate change and preliminary indications that the Forest Service could open up even more wolverine habitat to winter motorized use could spell doom for wolverines in north-central Idaho."

"Wolverine are rare, wide-ranging carnivores of the high wild country facing growing threats from climate change and winter recreation," said Dave Werntz, Science and Conservation Director at Conservation Northwest. "Wolverine deserve federal protection and the associated resources and recovery actions to ensure a future for wolverine in the Pacific Northwest."

“Once again, the federal government has failed the wolverine,” said Brad Smith, North Idaho Director, Idaho Conservation League. Without critically needed conservation efforts that a threatened or endangered listing would trigger, we fear that future generations of Idahoans will never be lucky enough to see the rare and sensitive wolverine.”

“Climate change and habitat fragmentation have not magically disappeared, but in fact continue to push wolverines in the Lower 48 to the brink,” said Jonathan Proctor, Rockies and Plains program director at Defenders of Wildlife. “With this decision, the Fish and Wildlife Service has abandoned its moral and legal obligation to protect these animals, but we will not abandon our ongoing effort to see them legally protected.”

“Now more than ever, we need to speak the truth about the health of our ecosystem and wildlife,” said Skye Schell, Executive Director of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance. “It is past time for our government to formally recognize the severe threats that wolverines face, and then to take action to protect this rare and significant species. Wolverines embody the spirit of the wild that is in danger from ever-increasing human impacts, and this may be our last chance to maintain a healthy wolverine population for future generations.”

Background

Wolverines, the largest land-dwelling members of the weasel family, once roamed across the northern tier of the United States and as far south as New Mexico in the Rockies and Southern California in the Sierra Nevada range. After more than a century of trapping and habitat loss, wolverines in the Lower 48 today exist only as small, fragmented populations in Idaho, Montana, Washington, Wyoming, and northeast Oregon.

In the wolverine’s last strongholds, the species is at direct risk from climate change. Wolverines depend on areas with deep snow through late spring. Pregnant females dig their dens into this snowpack to birth and raise their young. Snowpack is already in decline in the western mountains, a trend that is predicted to worsen with a warming climate.

Wolverine populations are also at risk from traps, human disturbance, habitat fragmentation, and extremely low population numbers resulting in low genetic diversity. Without new conservation efforts the dangers faced by wolverines threaten remaining populations with localized extinctions and inbreeding.

Recognizing these threats and the need for new protection measures, conservation groups petitioned to list the wolverine as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 2000. For two decades, the Fish and Wildlife Service has time and again delayed and obstructed the proposed wolverine listing. These tactics have required public advocates for the wolverine to repeatedly turn to the courts for enforcement of the Endangered Species Act. Earthjustice and the groups it represents have won every case they have filed on behalf of the wolverine, either through judicial rulings in their favor or through favorable settlement agreements.

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